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East Timor and the Western Democracies

Before this audience, it is unnecessary for me to review in any detail the recent history of East Timor or the substantial evidence that has been accumulated revealing the scale and character of the horrors perpetrated by the Indonesian army in the course of its aggression since 1975. I will therefore concentrate on another matter, namely, the response to these events in the West. This is a matter of considerable significance in itself, not only because of the insight it provides into the nature of the free institutions of the West, but also because the Indonesian aggression could not have taken place and could not continue without the crucial support of the Western industrial democracies, as is obvious with no further comment.

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By late 1977, it was reported in the world press that Indonesian military supplies were virtually exhausted. But the Western democracies have replenished these supplies, enabling the Indonesian armed forces to conduct new offensives, new atrocities against the population of East Timor. Counterinsurgency aircraft such as the OV-10 Broncos, helicopters to move troops to remote areas, planes and chemicals for crop destruction to deprive the population of food -- these and much more are the contributions of the West to freedom and human rights in Timor. But the resistance fights on, and will, we may hope, fight on to final victory and liberation despite the treachery of the Western democracies.

I will not proceed now to record the grim story of the Western-backed atrocities in Timor, but a few indications may nevertheless be useful reminders. Perhaps I may also recall some of the basic facts.

By September 1975, FRETILIN had gained complete control over East Timor, and at the end of November, declared independence. Western journalists and visitors -- among them Ken Fry -- testified to the widespread and sincere popular support for FRETILIN, support that was won through their constructive social and educational programs. Indonesian military intervention began at once, in September, and on December 7 there was a full-scale invasion. There is no question that Western powers knew that an invasion was imminent. Diplomatic cables leaked to the press in Australia reveal clearly that Australia and the US were well-aware of what was happening, though they preferred to turn a blind eye and to maintain an official pretense of ignorance. The invasion took place just as President Ford and Henry Kissinger were leaving Jakarta, and Kissinger pointedly observed to the press that the US understands Indonesia's position with regard to Timor.

Massacres and atrocities began at once. By September 1976, priests in East Timor reported to Indonesian church officials that 100,000 people had been killed in the course of the Indonesian aggression. Church sources have continued to plead for some help or at least attention from the West. To cite only one example, in November 1977, a priest in East Timor managed to have a letter smuggled to Portugal, in which he wrote that from the December 1975 invasion until February, Indonesian warships bombarded the hills around Dili 24 hours a day while helicopters and military aircraft flew over the country where an Indonesian army of 50,000 men attacked with tanks and armored cars. His letter continues:

> In December 1976 there was an intense movement in the Dili harbor, unloading war materials and troops. From December the war was

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> intensified. The war planes do not stop all day long. Hundreds of people die daily. The bodies are food for the vultures. If bullets do not kill us we die from epidemic diseases. Villages are completely destroyed...FRETILIN troops are shot dead... Genocide will be soon, perhaps by next December.

He reports further that the Bishop had resigned and that church buildings were destroyed, while the economy has become one of "cabarets and brothels." The people oppose integration but those [illegible] "controlled by the Indonesians are like sheep that you take to the slaughterhouse," an image that may arouse some memories in a Western conscience that is now much intrigued by another holocaust, while it ignores the present holocaust to which the West contributes as it watches television scenes from 40 years ago, an amazing display of cynicism.

Of all the countries in the West, only Portugal took the honorable course of breaking relations with Indonesia. The US and other powers prefer to look the other way, while supplying the armaments required for the holocaust to continue and pretending at the same time that the war is over. And, of course, always lauding Western civilization for its unique and unending devotion to the cause of human rights.

In November 1978, I was granted the opportunity to testify before the United Nations on the situation in East Timor, and on the response in the West to the atrocities committed by the Indonesian invaders in the course of their aggression. I concentrated my remarks on the United States, which has played the primary role in providing Indonesia with the material and diplomatic support it requires to persist in its aggression and massacres. By the admission of the State Department, the United States supplied some 90% of the arms used by the Indonesian invaders, and in flat contradiction to false testimony by government spokesmen at Congressional Hearings, the U.S. government continued to provide armaments to Indonesia, including new offers of arms, in the early post-invasion period and indeed since. In these remarks, too, I will concentrate on the United States, though to my knowledge the situation is not markedly different in the other Western democracies, with the partial exception of Australia.

In my testimony before the United Nations, the major topic that I discussed was the behavior of the so-called "free press." A book that has since appeared contains extensive additional documentation on the reaction of the "free press" and the U.S. government to the violence and atrocities committed in East Timor, which, I again want to emphasize, are a direct and continuing responnibility of the Western industrial powers that have eagerly sought to participate in this glorious massacre by providing the armaments that Indonesia desperately needs and by concealing the gruesome record.

The major conclusion, documented beyond any possible argument in my opinion, is that the "free press" has behaved precisely in the manner that we would expect to find in a totalitarian state. Since the United States and other Western powers have an interest in concealing the atrocities for which they are responsible through the medium of their valued Indonesian client, the "free press," outside of Australia, has loyally maintained its silence. The matter was no different, for example, during the period of the so-called "secret bombing" of Cambodia in 1969 -- the bombing was "secret" insofar as the "free press" refused to publish or report Prince Sihanouk's impassioned appeals for international condemnation of the American bombings. On the rare occasions when some reference to Timor is permitted, the "free press" generally confines

itself to absurd falsifications invented by the Indonesian propaganda ministry and the U.S. State Department. Thus distinguished Western newspapers inform their readers that the killings in East Timor took lace during the "fratricidal civil war" and that Timorese who had been "forced to live" under the control of the fierce FRETILIN terrorists are seeking refuge under the "protection" of the Indonesian army. Exceptions exist, but they are rare indeed, and in the mainstream American press, virtually non-existent.

It is, of course, possible to find analogues to the cowardice and dishonesty of the "free press" in this matter, not only in its own far from distinguished record elsewhere in recent and earlier history, but perhaps more strikingly, in the record of journals that quite openly serve some totalitarian state. For example, the Stalinist press in the West always devoted itself to concealing the [redacted] crimes of the Russian state. But the comparison is misleading. The Stalinist press did not sink to the level of depravity of the "free press" of the West, which is not only concealing the atrocities for which the states it serves bear primary responsibility, but is contributing quite directly to aiding and encouraging these continuing massacres, with its silence and its lies. An informed public opinion in the Western democracies might well impede the efforts of these states to provide the material and diplomatic support that Indonesia requires to conduct its barbaric repression in Timor. An informed public opinion might, in fact, bring the Western industrial democracies to impose pressures on Indonesia that would compel it to terminate its savage aggression. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that the "free press," in its craven subservienc to the state propaganda system, is a direct and willing participant in what the Australian Parliament [redacted] Legislative Research Service has described as "indiscriminate killing on a scale unprecedented in post-World War II history." This is a fact -- an undeniable fact, in my opinion -- that merits careful consideration on the part of citizens of the Western industrial democracies, as well as others who are concerned to understand the institutions and behavior of these powers.

Perhaps a general comment on these matters would be appropriate before I [redacted] return to the specific matter of East Timor and the Western respons In the industrial democracies, obedience is imposed not by force, but by other and more subtle means. The mads media, of course, are major capitalist enterprises and are not likely to stray from doctrinal orthodoxy, no more so than, for example, the Board of Directors of General Motors. Furthermore, they are indirectly influenced or directly tied to the state, which is itself closely linked to the major centers of private economic power in numerous and well-known ways. In the commercial media, private advertising provides additional powerful pressures for conformism. For the intelligentsia in general, journalists in particular, conformity to the ideological requirements of state and private power offers opportunities for advancement, prestige and privilege, a phenomenon that is particularly striking and significant in the United States. In general, a complex network of shared interests, shared associations, and direct or indirect pressures, rooted ultimately in the great disparities of power that exist in all of the capitalist democracies, ensures that dissidence, while not subjected to the severe

penalties characteristic of the totalitarian states, will be limited in scale and public impact. It is only when popular movements develop out of the control of economic, political and ideological elites, as in the case of the American peace movement of the 1960's, that these limits are breached in more than marginal ways. And when this occurs, it gives rise to fear and concern on the part of the powerful and privileged, who are compelled to undertake serious efforts to contain the threat of intellectual freedom and democratic politics. A noteworthy example of this reaction can be seen in the important study, The Crisis of Democracy, published by the Trilateral Commission, which brings together elite groups in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. This study, published in 1975, advocated measures to reduce the citizenry of the industrial democracies to their traditional passivity and obedience, so that what the Commission calls "democracy" -- that is, the untroubled rule by elite groups ultimately representing private power -- can be preserved.

It should be obvious to any reader of the major Western media that a program of ideological reconstruction is now in operation in an effort to overcome the anti-imperialist sentiments that developed in much of the world in the course of the popular movements of the 1960's, as the true character of the Indochina wars could no longer be disguised. This effort encompasses not only the "free press," but also cinema and so-called "scholarship" -- in fact, some of the most vulgar and disgraceful examples are to be found precisely in the latter sphere. The behavior of the "free press" with regard to Timor is a particularly remarkable but hardly exceptional instance of the functioning of these processes of ideological reconstruction.

Sometimes, history is kind enough to provide us with a virtual controlled experiment to verify certain theses. The Western response to events in East Timor is a case in point. It offers a rather precise test of the true significance of the sudden concern for human rights that has blossomed in the West in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam war, the spread of a plague of neo-fascist states backed by the United States in Latin America, the U.S.-backed military coup in Indonesia and the huge subsequent massacre, and other similar phenomena within the domains of Western influence and control. Let us consider the experiment which recent history offers, in this regard.

In my remarks at the United Nations, I noted a comparison between the response of the "free press" and articulate Western opinion in general to events in Cambodia and in Timor. There are, in fact, some remarkable parallels in the two situations, enough to offer a fair test of the meaning of the human rights crusade. The time frame is identical: 1975 to the present. The same region of the world is involved, so one cannot appeal to the general lack of concern for remote and exotic places to differentiate the two examples. In Cambodia, the harshest critics of the regime allege that perhaps 100,000 people or more were massacred by the Khmer Rouge. Much higher figures commonly appear in Soviet-bloc and Western propaganda, but a careful look will show that these further

estimates, where they are not simple inventions based on no known evidence, include deaths from starvation and disease that are, to so small extent, chargeable to the American account (not to speak of the destructive impact of French colonialism); recall that high U.S. officials predicted in 1975 that a million people would die as a result of the conditions left by the American war. Turning to Timor, it appears that approximately the same number of people have been killed in the course of the Western-backed Indonesian invasion, perhaps 100,000 or more. In this case, the figures derive not from hostile critics, but from people who at first were willing to accept of Indonesian "integration." Relative to the population, the scale of the massacres in Timor is perhaps 5 or 10 times as high as in Cambodia, by rather conservative estimate. Furthermore, these deaths cannot be attributed to peasant revenge and similar factors that may well have been operative in Cambodia, given the history of rural violence long before and during a brutal war violence, repression and aggression. Rather, the Timorese massacres took place in the course of direct aggression, which has been regarded as a rather serious matter since Nuremberg, at least, when it is conducted by the wrong parties. As for the quality of the evidence available, there is no time to survey it here; I have done so elsewhere, in considerable detail, and I think it can be shown convincingly that the evidence concerning atrocities and massacres in East Timor is at least as credible as what has been produced in great profusion in the case of Cambodia. Again, this is a rather conservative judgment, in the light of the evidence now available.

So much for parallels. Consider now some dissimilarities. First, whatever the facts may have been in the case of Cambodia, there was very little that anyone in the West could do about the matter, apart from encouraging a Vietnamese invasion which is almost certain to lead to still further catastrophes. But this is not at all true in the case of Timor, obviously: in this case, exposure and protest might well have mitigated or brought to an end the aggression and massacres for which the West bears direct responsibility. Thus by any reasonable moral standards -- that is, any standards that relate to the human consequences of one's acts -- the case of Timor is vastly more significant for the West than that of Cambodia. There is a second and closely related difference between the two cases. In the case of Cambodia, there has been an international outcry of unprecedented proportions, and the media, East and West, have eagerly seized upon any scrap of evidence, however tarnished, that might be used to demonstrate the iniquity of the Khmer Rouge, even giving vast exposure to well-documented fabrications. In the case of Timor, in dramatic contrast, we discover a veil of silence, occasionally lifted for Indonesian or State Department apologetics circulated by the loyal and subservient press. The contrast reveals with brilliant clarity the true significance of the recent "human rights" clamor in the West, specifically, the Carter crusade, which is, surprisingly, taken seriously even by normally rational Western observers.

The comparison merits a bit more attention. It has been specifically brought to the attention of the State Department. The response deserves quotation in full. I read from a letter, dated January 5 1979, sent from the U.S. State Department in response to an inquiry by the editor of a

British journal concerned with international affairs who had raised a private inquiry:

Assistant Secretary of State Holbrooke has asked me to reply to your letter of December 6 concerning United States policy toward Indonesia and Kampuchea, especially concerning human rights.

The United States Government has followed the situation in East Timor with great concern. The recent history of the territory has included precipitate Portuguese withdrawal, fratricidal warfare, and the Indonesian armed intervention. However, as the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia is now an accomplished fact, it is our view -- shared by many other governments -- that efforts should be directed toward ensuring that the people of East Timor receive humanitarian and economic aid from the Indonesian Government, international organizations, and other sources, in order to overcome the dire poverty in which most of them live.

We have made certain that the U.S. Government's position on East Timor is clearly understood by the Government of Indonesia and are gratified by that Government's decision to grant greater access to international humanitarian organizations. The Australian and New Zealand Red Cross societies, working with the Indonesian Red Cross, have already begun providing assistance. We now understand that other voluntary agencies, such as Catholic Relief Services, may be permitted to work directly inside East Timor, and we anticipate that U.S. funding will be made available for their relief and assistance programs. It is our hope that the International Committee of the Red Cross will also be able to participate in these efforts.

Recent visitors to East Timor, including our Ambassador, inform us that the Indonesian Government appears to be taking very seriously its role in providing political stability and improving the living conditions of the people. Extensive efforts are underway to resettle the thousands of persons who have sought protection in the areas controlled by the Indonesian Government. Other activities suggest that humanitarian and economic assistance programs now enjoy the highest priority of the Jakarta Government.

In marked constrast to the efforts by the Government of Indonesia to east (sic) the plight of the impoverished people of East Timor, I should point out that President Carter has termed the abuse of human rights in Kampuchea (Cambodia) to be "the worst in the world." Consequently, we have been unwilling to seek relations with, much less "support" the Kampuchean Government.

We will, of course, continue to follow these developments closely and we appreciate your expression of interest.

Sincerely,

Paul M. Cleveland

Acting Director, Office of Regional Affairs, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

It would, again, be superfluous, before this audience, to comment in detail on this remarkable document. Massacres and brutal atrocities have been converted into "efforts to ease the plight of impoverished people"; the miserable remnants who flee the rubble of their devastated villages and their defoliated fields are "seeking protection in the areas controlled by the Indonesian Government," which is showing such notable concern for its impoverished charges -- impoverished by whom, the author does not say. A letter of this sort, produced by the propaganda servides of a Hitler or a Stalin, might have left even George Orwell open-mouthed with astonishment and disbelief. But it would not cause a murmur in the "free press," which has willingly disseminated quite comparable vulgarities in the interests of the states it serves.

The reference to the International Red Cross perhaps deserves special attention. A year ago, the leading liberal representative of the U.S. Government, Vice-President Mondale, journeyed through Asia to spread the gospel of human rights, consulting with such outstanding practitioners as Marcos and Suharto. While visiting Jakarta, he found himself so impressed with the magnificent human rights performance of his hosts that he telephoned Washington, on his personal initiative, to urge that Indonesia be provided with A-4 attack bombers, in recognition of their achievements in the human rights domain -- a great contribution to enhancing the human rights of the people of Timor. Apparently there was a condition: Indonesia was to permit the International Red Cross to operate in East Timor. Many months later, the State Department expresses its "hope" that Indonesia, in its zeal to ease the plight of the unfortunates for whom it has taken responsibility, will allow the International Red Cross to assist in its humanitarian efforts. Meanwhile the U.S. and its allies continue to supply arms to the Indonesian forces so that they can presume that they have already been employed to help convince other impoverished people to seek Indonesian "protection" so that they too can benefit from the ministrations of the human rights crusaders in Jakarta, whose efforts so impress their counterparts in Washington. And the Indonesian Government and its friends and supporters in the U.S. executive are no doubt laughing up their sleeves, as they read tributes to the noble human rights crusade in the world press.

It would be unfair to leave the impression that the United States stands alone in its cynicism in this regard, even though it has few competitors for blatant hypocrisy concerning human rights, just as it is unique in the extent of the backing it has provided for the Indonesian massacres. Other Western powers do their best, however. Thus AFP (Agence France Press) was invited to a press conference at the United Nations called to discuss the situation in East Timor. The bureau declined to attend, responding to the invitation with the reply that people in Paris are not interested in Timor, as is no doubt correct. An indication of this lack of interest was provided only a few weeks earlier, when the French Foreign Minister visited Jakarta. In an interview published in Le Monde, he described the achievements of his visit: new arms sales to Indonesia, plans for co-production of armaments, etc. Asked about France's attitude towards Indonesian exploits in Timor, the Foreign Minister brushed the issue

aside, commenting merely that France would do nothing to embarrass its Indonesian friends, who afford it such excellent economic opportunities. To my knowledge, none of this caused a ripple of protest in Paris, in striking contrast to the reaction in France to events in Cambodia or the travail of the Vietnamese "boat people." As in the United States, when it is possible to place the blame on "the enemy" -- particularly, one so ungracious as to extricate itself from the Western dominated global system -- there are no limits to hysteria and moralistic outrage. But when France announces that it will join in atrocities that are surely no less savage, no comment or action is deemed necessary. The pattern is, unfortunately, a very familiar one. There are no doubt many decent Russians who are genuinely outraged over U.S. atrocities in Vietnam or the violent overthrow of the Allende regime, but who cannot be troubled over Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or concentration camps in Siberia. The other fellow's crimes are always much easier to deal with.

One might add, at this point, that it should come as little surprise, in the light of post-World War II history, that France and the United States should be the leading centers of condemnation and propaganda concerning the criminal actions, real or alleged, of those who have recently escaped colonial domination in Southeast Asia.

There are a small number of people, several of them here, who have made serious and dedicated efforts over the past years to inform the Western public about the situation in East Timor. I am personally indebted to them for what I have been able to learn about this matter. Their efforts have very largely been a failure. It has been impossible the break through the system of news and information control. They have their own tales to tell, much more extensive than my own. But perhaps I can conclude with an illustration from my own experience. A leading American review of journalism, which prides itself on its critical analysis of the shortcomings of the press, asked me to submit an article on news coverage of postwar Indochina. I suggested instead an article on Timor, urging that the importance was far greater, for the obvious reasons that I have already mentioned. After some negotiation, they finally refused, on the following grounds: since virtually no one had heard of Timor, there would be no interest in such an article. So the circle is complete. First, the "free press" suppresses vital information in the service of the state; and then, no discussion of this suppression can take place because it has been so effective that no one has heard of the topic. Again, a situation that an Orwell might appreciate.

What can be done to reach public opinion, in the face of the treachery of the media? The experience of the American peace movement shows that it is sometimes possible. Though the American press was, and remained, almost completely within the framework of the U.S. propaganda system, contrary to what is widely believed, throughout the Vietnam war, nevertheless it did become possible to express a different point of view to a fairly wide audience, in part through the creation of alternative forms such as teach-ins and independent media, in part because of the impact of the actions of a mass popular movement. In this case, the task

will be much more difficult. The Vietnam war, fought with American troops, could not be hidden from view, as this war is. Whatever the prespects for success, the effort must be undertaken, with enterprise and energy. The struggle of the people of East Timor for liberty and justice in the face of overwhelming odds is one of the most inspiring of modern history, and one of the most painful to record. Their courage surely demands that no effort be spared to aid them to bring this struggle to a successful conclusion.

Noam Chomsky
Pisa
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